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TV Ministries Not To Blame For Decline In Church Attendance

(Reprinted from *University of Pennsylvania News*, April 16, 1984.)

The television ministries that attract millions of viewers and contributors are influential with their audiences, but watching religious programs doesn't keep people from going to church.

Those who support evangelical broadcasters also attend and contribute to local churches, according to a two-year study of religion and television by the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communications.

The Gallup Organization of Princeton, N.J. also participated in the study, which was commissioned by a group of more than 30 religious organizations ranging from the "mainline" United Presbyterian Church and the U.S. Catholic Conference to television ministries like the PTL Network and the Old Time Gospel Hour.

ELECTRONIC CHURCH NOT CAUSE OF CHURCH DECLINE

The idea that the "electronic church" is responsible for declining participation in local churches was contradicted by the research findings. But also disproved was the belief that charismatic television personalities have created a new and expanding audience of religious converts. Rather, the researchers found that this stable and loyal television audience displayed a long-standing allegiance to organized religion.

"Television ministries have been suspected of causing or at least contributing to the erosion of mainline church membership, financial contributions, and general participation," said George Gerbner, dean of the Annenberg School of Communications and a member of the research team. "Our study found no support for that charge.

"There must be other explanations if church attendance has declined and there is a lack of financial support," he said. Gerbner added that research over the years has shown that, in many respects, prime-time television drama – with its much larger audience – is "the new religion," not the programs that are religious in content.

"Watching television has become a ritual that meets certain needs that used to be satisfied by religion," Gerbner said.

Investigators for the research project on religion and television were George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Stewart Hoover, Michael Morgan and Nancy Signorielli, all of the Annenberg School; Harry Cotugno of the Gallup Organization; and Robert Wuthnow, a sociologist at Princeton University.

According to surveys conducted for this report, there are about 13.3 million regular viewers of religious programs covering all denominations. This is about 6.2% of the estimated number of persons in households with television.

"We found that the audience for religious television is smaller than has been claimed, though this group is consistent in its viewing habits," said the researchers. "The programs appeal to an older, traditional audience and watching these programs appears to be a confirmation of their religious beliefs, not a substitute for them. Their interest in the electronic church is complementary to other forms of religious practice, like church worship."

VIEWERS ARE OLDER, MORE 'FUNDAMENTALIST'

Members of this audience, drawn by television content not found on other television shows, are older, have less education and income, are more conservative politically, and are more "fundamentalist" in their religious beliefs. They are also more likely to live in rural areas and in the South and Midwest, compared to those who do not watch religious programs.

Other characteristics comparing viewers to non-viewers:

* Half of the viewers say they are dissatisfied with the "prevailing moral climate," compared to only one-third of non-viewers.
* Half of the viewers consider evangelicalism and missionary work to be the main goal of the church; only one-third of the non-viewers feel this way.
* Conversely, only one-fifth of the viewers said the church should be "working for

social justice;" but one-third of the non-viewers consider this a priority of the church.

* Heavy viewers of religious programs express greater confidence in local church leaders than both light viewers and non-viewers.

* Heavy viewers of general television are less likely than light viewers to read the Bible.

In addition to the evangelical broadcasters, television programs are also produced by local church organizations. According to an analysis of their content, the essential features of both types of programs are similar. Discussions of political issues occur in about half of both types of programs. There is frequent condemnation of abortion, homosexuality, and other behavior described as deviant. "Sinful sexual behavior," for example, was addressed in one out of four religious programs.

Regarding the relationship between the television ministries and local congregations, the study revealed that local churches are mentioned in one of every four of these religious programs. And, in one out of 10 programs viewers were urged to attend church.

On the evangelical programs, the most often mentioned personal problems were family tensions, financial and health problems, unemployment and physical handicaps. In one of every four programs a solution suggested for these difficulties was a financial contribution to the ministry.

TV EVANGELISTS MORE LIKELY TO SOLICIT FUNDS

In fact, a key distinction between the two types of programs is the solicitation of funds. The television evangelists are more likely to ask for money, to make numerous requests, and ask for greater amounts.

Who are the participants in religious television programs? According to the researchers, these individuals are predominantly white and male. Distinctions between the sexes are portrayed in traditional ways. "People who inhabit religious television are similar to the characters who populate the fictional world of prime-time drama," they said.

Here are their findings:

* Men outnumber women by a considerable margin in all religious programs.

* Men are portrayed in roles of authority, as clergy, for instance.

* Women are generally younger than the men and are rarely, if ever, portrayed as clergy; also, they rarely quote the Bible.

* Women are more likely than men to reveal that they suffer from physical ailments and to talk about their personal problems.

The religious organizations that sponsored this research were members of a coalition called the Ad Hoc Committee on Electronic Church Research, representing the National Council of Churches, the PTL Network, The Old Time Gospel Hour, the United States Catholic Conference, the Southern Baptist Convention, the United Presbyterian Church, National Religious Broadcasters and 30 other religious organizations.

FIVE REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD ORDER *RELIGION IN AMERICA, '84*

1. *Religion in America, 1984* is an invaluable source of information on religious beliefs and practices in the U.S. and a broad, much of which is not available elsewhere.

2. It provides national and regional norms against which the clergy can match their own churches or synagogues in terms of religious belief, practice, knowledge and stewardship.

3. It provides new and exciting information that can be developed into sermons or articles on the the state of religion.

4. It provides data indispensable for future planning: What are the new religious interests of church members and non-members? Where does the public think churches are falling short?

5. Specific steps, based on survey data, are suggested as ways to strengthen churches and to improve their outreach.

HOW TO ORDER

Religion in America, 1984 can be ordered from the Gallup Organization, Inc., P.O. Box 310, Princeton, New Jersey 08542 for $25.00.

INTERESTED IN CONDUCTING A SURVEY OF YOUR CHURCH?

A growing number of priests, ministers and rabbis have expressed interest in conducting surveys of their congregations and/or local communities.

If you share this interest and would like expert help and advice, we suggest you contact Russell D. Bredholt, Continental Research Associates, 1153 Winged Foot Circle, Winter Springs, Florida 32708. Telephone: (305) 365-4321. Continental Research Associates is affiliated with the Princeton Religion Research Center.

Opportunity And Challenges For American Churches In The 1980s

(Speech given by George Gallup, Jr. at 35th Anniversary Dinner of Religion in American Life, March 28, 1984.)

Across the nation this evening, at this very moment, millions of Americans are praying together and studying the Bible together – part of an encouraging trend that is spreading across the nation.

There is, in America today, a rising tide of interest in religion, and the evidence is coming in from all sides.

A majority of Americans, for example, say they are more interested in religious and spiritual matters than five years ago, according to a survey we conducted for the Christian Broadcasting Network. And the same survey shows many Americans saying they are becoming more reliant upon God.

The people of this nation, it would appear, are coming increasingly to the belief that the problems of the world will not be solved through man's efforts alone, but through a change of heart and a turning to God – not simply through social engineering, but social engineering energized and uplifted by spiritual renewal.

FERMENT FOUND ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

There is also much religious ferment on the college campuses of the nation, with a marked increase in the last five years in the number of students who say religion is important in their lives and who attend church regularly. Among college students today, it is no longer the "in thing" to be secular.

Professor Harvey Cox of the Harvard Divinity School notes that college courses on religion are far more popular than two and three decades ago and had this to say in a recent issue of *U.S. News and World Report:*

"Rather than the cynical, careerist types who supposedly fill the campuses, I see young people who are intensely interested in moral issues, in religious history and beliefs. They are searching for something that's worth living for and they don't accept dogmatic answers."

FACTORS PROMPTING SPIRITUAL SEARCH

Clearly Americans today are searching for spiritual moorings with a new intensity. What is prompting this search?

Among the key factors that can be cited are these:

(1) A need for hope in these troubled times of nuclear threat, with a note of desperation sometimes found in the comments of survey respondents: "Where else but to God does one turn in times like these?"

(2) A gnawing loneliness among Americans – greater loneliness, we find in surveys, than found in many other nations – that is causing Americans urgently to seek supportive and dependable fellowship. One of the greatest problems of our times is that of strained relationships.

(3) A disenchantment with modern lifestyles and with what is perceived to be a lack of rules and an "anything goes" philosophy in society.

Amid the speculation over reasons for the growing interest in religion and involvement in religious education programs, one obvious factor is sometimes overlooked – the energetic and creative efforts of the nation's clergy of all faiths, who are beginning to make diligent efforts to find out where people are in their religious lives and to develop the appropriate programs to meet the pressing spiritual needs of Americans.

So I would like to take this occasion tonight – the 35th Anniversary Dinner of Religion in American Life – to salute the ministers, pastors, priests, rabbis and other religious leaders of the United States – men and women who have gained the highest level of respect of any profession in our nation.

CHURCHES REACH MAJORITY IN U.S.

Certainly our churches and synagogues are in a unique position of influence in that they reach a large majority of the American people in a given month, whether in places of worship or through the media.

The high level of confidence in our local and national religious leaders is coupled with a high level of religiousness among American people: nine in 10 state a religious preference, eight in 10 say religion is important in their lives. Even a high proportion of the "unchurched" can be classified as "believers." Most of us pray and believe in the power of prayer. And we want our faith to grow and religion to play a greater role in society.

Given the high level of public confidence in our churches and clergy, and the fact that Americans are essentially a religious people who want to deepen their faith, organized religion clearly has enormous opportunities in the immediate years ahead.

THREE KEY CHALLENGES FACING U.S. CHURCHES

But if the opportunities are great, so are the challenges. I would like to note three of these key challenges, which will set much of the agenda for the churches in the 1980s:

1. *Raising the level of ethics and morality in the United States.* A large majority of Americans, we discovered in a recent Wall Street Journal/Gallup survey, believe that the level of ethics among the public has declined over the last decade, and additional findings from this same survey support such a conclusion.

"Cheating is epidemic and 'big business' across the

U.S.," Hattye Liston, Professor at the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, recently told the annual convention of the American Psychological Association.

Columnist Michael McManus questions the impact of religion in our society and makes this observation: "If religion does not produce a more ethical, loving society, something is fundamentally wrong with the way that religion is being practiced."

2. *Dealing with hunger and deprivation in the United States.* One-fifth of the U.S. population, we found in a recent Gallup Poll, claim there were times during the last 12 months when they did not have enough money to buy food, clothing or medical supplies their families needed. Among blacks, the proportion is close to 50%.

A comparison of the current findings with those recorded in a survey 10 years ago, in the recession year of 1974, shows that the situation may actually have grown worse – at least in the public's perceptions.

3. *Raising the level of self-esteem or self-worth among the American people.* In a survey we conducted for the Robert Schuller Ministries we discovered that three in 10 Americans have a low sense of self-worth. In reviewing the survey findings, Dr. Schuller said:

"In the past decade, major religious bodies have often missed the most important mark – building the self-esteem and self-dignity of the person.

"I have said and preached for many years that one's self-esteem – or put more simply, how you, yourself, feel about yourself – is the key to a physically, spiritually, and emotionally satisfied life.

"The results of the Gallup survey confirm that belief, and also point up organized religion's shortcomings in reaching the 'hurting' three in 10 who need a closer and warmer relationship to God."

FOCUS: DEEPEN COMMITMENT

To meet these three giant challenges, as well as other challenges, it should be a prime focus of our churches to try to deepen the level of spiritual commitment in our society, for the "highly spiritually committed" in our nation are, indeed, a "breed apart" from the rest of the populace – they work harder to better society, they are more involved in person-to-person practical religion – and they are far happier.

In short, their deep faith has had a transforming effect upon their lives. Even though they represent only about one-tenth of the population, their impact upon our society is profound and far out of proportion to their numbers.

How can our religious institutions deepen the level of spiritual commitment among Americans?

PRACTICAL APPROACH IS CALLED FOR

In my view, the need at this point in time is for the churches to take a very practical, "how to" approach to America's spiritual needs. The emphasis should not only be on the "what" of religion – helping people clarify *what* they believe and *why* – but on the *how* of religion – helping people understand what it means to be a disciple, how religious commitment can be deepened, how to live out one's faith.

Specifically, there is a great need for churches and synagogues to help people bring the Bible into their lives. For many Americans the Bible remains inaccessible.

PEOPLE NEED HELP WITH PRAYER LIVES

Secondly, people need help with their prayer lives – greater efforts need to be made to help people work out their own individual devotional plan. It has been rightly said that prayer is one of the most underdeveloped resources of mankind.

Thirdly, churches and synagogues need to encourage not only private and public worship, but worship in small fellowship groups as well. This, I believe, is the important, although frequently missing, third dimension in our devotional lives today.

McMANUS MAKES KEY OBSERVATION

Michael McManus makes what I believe to be a very important observation:

"The one difference I see between churchgoers and those with deep spiritual faith is that the latter meet frequently and in small groups with others in fellowship, prayer and mutual support. In this setting, people can see the power of prayer and make the exciting discovery that God really cares about them personally."

As I noted earlier, we are seeing a growth in small fellowship groups in the United States, and many observers see this as a very encouraging sign. Edgar Jackson, in his book, *Understanding Prayer*, writes: "Whenever the church in history has been spiritually vigorous, there has been small-group prayer activity taking place."

Every effort should be made to respond to America's call for spiritual help, and it is a loud call. At the same time, it is important that our religious institutions give the populace a message of hope in these troubled times. We should be constantly reminded that there is much that we can do as individuals to lift up the less fortunate in our nation – and we should be constantly reminded that when we truly do the Lord's work, we are never alone.

Senate Action Came At A Time When 74% Favor Prayer In School

The Senate rejection of two proposed amendments that would have cleared the way for organized prayer in public schools came at a time when a large, although slightly reduced, majority of Americans, 74%, expressed support for prayer in the public schools.

Earlier surveys (since the 1962 ruling) had also shown large majorities in favor of prayer in schools. For example, in 1974, 77% of persons interviewed said they backed an amendment to the Constitution that would permit prayers to be said in the public schools.

The two amendments rejected by the Senate were one that would have nullified the Supreme Court's initial 1962 prohibition against official sponsorship of religious activities in school, and one that would have permitted silent prayer in schools.

ONE-FIFTH REPORT PRAYERS IN SCHOOLS

The same survey shows about one-fifth (18%) of public school parents reporting that prayers, either aloud or silent, take place on a regular basis in the schools of their community.

Two-thirds (67%) of parents say that such prayer activity does not take place, while 15% admit to ignorance of the situation.

Of those who say that prayer, aloud or silent, takes place, 12% say a teacher or school official leads the students in silent prayer or meditation, 6% say they lead the students in saying a prayer aloud; while 3% report that a teacher or official reads a prayer to the students.

92% ARE AWARE OF PRAYER AMENDMENT

All persons in the current survey were first asked this question:

Have you heard or read about a proposed amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would allow voluntary prayer in the public schools?

A very high 92% replied in the affirmative (the comparable figure for both 1982 and 1983 is 82%).

Those who had heard or read about the proposed amendment were then asked:

Do you favor or oppose this proposed amendment?

Following are the latest results and trend, based on those who were aware of the proposed amendment:

PRAYER IN SCHOOLS
(Based on aware group)

	Favor	Oppose	No opinion
	%	%	%
1984	74	19	7
1983	81	14	5
1982	79	16	5

All persons were then asked:

How strongly do you favor (oppose) this proposed Amendment – very strongly, fairly strongly, or not at all strongly?

Here are the latest results, based on the aware group:

STRENGTH OF SUPPORT
(Based on aware group)

Favor – Total		74%
Very stongly	46%	
Fairly strongly	26	
Not at all strongly	2	
Oppose – Total		19
Not at all strongly	1	
Fairly strongly	6	
Very strongly	12	
No opinion		7
		100%

All parents of public school students (27% of the sample) were handed a card and asked:

As far as you know, which of the items listed on this card take place on a regular basis in the public schools in this community?

Here are the national findings:

NAMED BY PUBLIC SCHOOL PARENTS

A teacher or school official leads the students in silent prayer or meditation	12%
A teacher or school official leads the students in saying a prayer aloud	6
A teacher or school official reads a prayer to the students	3
None of the above	67
Don't know	15
	103%*

*Total adds to more than 100% due to multiple responses.

West-European Values Examined In Survey

(Analysis by Jean Stoetzel, head of the Gallup-affiliated Faits et Opinions, of a survey on the state of values, undertaken in 1981 by Gallup-affiliated organizations in nine nations. More than 12,000 persons were interviewed.)

A survey on values of Europeans conducted in nine nations indicated that present-day Europe is not a continent of churchgoers. Only one-fourth of the European population of the nations surveyed attend religious services once a week. Two-thirds, however, describe themselves as religious; 75% believe in God; and 51% say God is important in their lives. About half find comfort and strength in religion and 58% spend time in prayer or contemplation each week. For two-thirds the Ten Commandments apply fully, and if you add those who say that the Commandments apply to a limited extent, you find more than eight out of 10 who somehow comply with the Decalogue.

DO COMMANDMENTS STILL APPLY TODAY?

Western Europe remains a Christian continent, but not in the eyes of the people themselves. When asked if they feel that the Commandments still apply to "most people," less than one-fourth say they do; furthermore, less than two-thirds say they apply either fully or to a limited extent.

In the ethical and familial fields, the Judeo-Christian influence or its remnants are visible. Six out of 10 of those interviewed say they regret having done something they felt was wrong. (It may not be a show of moral conscience, but a psychological process of disagreeing with one's ego. The older the respondent, the less they feel these qualms of conscience.)

When asked to select from a list of five virtues to teach children, the respondents selected honesty first by a majority of three out of four. Chosen next was tolerance and respect for older people.

Also asked to assess the gravity of a number of morally debatable acts, such as killing in self-defense, cheating on taxes, or using marijuana, at least half of the respondents rated each act as morally wrong.

Seventy-five percent disagree with those who say that marriage is an outdated institution; 52% disagree with those who practice sexual freedom; 81% believe a child, to grow happily, needs a home with both a father and a mother. Two-thirds of the respondents oppose abortion except when it is required for medical reasons. Although two-thirds consider a happy sexual relationship an important condition for a successful marriage, it is a factor well behind respect and appreciation (83%), faithfulness (81%), and understanding and tolerance (78%).

Half prefer spending their leisure time with families and 85% are reasonably satisfied with their home life.

These survey results lead me to conclude that the family is still highly valued in European life.

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